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As Portugal's mission-strategy collapses

TAPOL calls for decisive UN action on East Timor

The Portuguese Government's decision to suspend the visit to occupied East Timor of a Portuguese parliamentary mission is a shattering betrayal of the East Timorese people. They had eagerly awaited the visit and, despite the frenzied intimidation spread by the Indonesian forces of occupation, they were planning to use it to communicate to a world audience their aspirations for self-determination and an end to Indonesian rule.

TAPOL has always had serious reservations about the Portuguese Government's plans to send such a mission. Every foreign mission to East Timor is manipulated by the occupiers, denied free and unfettered access to the Timorese people and is closely guarded by security minders. Timorese youth, at great risk, broke through these barriers during the Pope's visit in October 1989 and the US ambassador's visit in January 1990.

It was evident that a visit by Portuguese parliamentarians would be a very different matter. The close affinity Timorese feel for the Portuguese, their total confidence in Portugal as the Administering Power, meant that this would be the great opening they had been waiting for.

The Indonesian army knew this better than anyone and could only contemplate a mission by mounting an unprecedented security campaign, inflicting ever more burdens on the long-suffering people of East Timor. As we now know, they launched an intelligence operation at the beginning of this year costing more than US$1 million, in addition to operations by territorials and special forces. How could the visit take place under such circumstances? How could anyone ever have expected that a Portuguese mission would proceed in an atmosphere of calm?

For the first few years, we reported the mission plans with a heavy dose of scepticism, never believing it would happen. Then, it became apparent to us that the Timorese people pinned every hope on it, forcing us to change our tune.

We were also sceptical because the visit became the central plank of Portugal's strategy. Talks in New York under UN auspices, since 1982 General Assembly Resolution 37/30, have focused solely on the visit, allowing no place for the self-determination issue. Neither Portugal nor the UN would take any initiative to insist on Timorese representatives taking part in the talks, as provided by the Resolution. Everything was subordinated to the visit. The talks have been shrouded in secrecy, keeping everyone, even the Portuguese MPs, in the dark. While the Indonesian Foreign Ministry has used every opportunity to sow confusion about Portuguese diplomacy, the Portuguese Government has remained silent, failing to inform the international community of what was going on.

Now our worst fears have been realised. Intimidation and repression reign supreme in East

Timor. This would have been bearable had the MPs come; instead, the Timorese have been abandoned.

Everything we have heard in the past few days indicates that the Timorese people still want the visit to take place. But although the Speaker of the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic said that the dispute over Jill Jolliffe led to the suspension, we do not believe that to be the case, having closely followed the Portuguese press. We believe that developments inside East Timor, Bishop Belo's desperate plea for an international mission, even a call from politicians of Apodeti and other formerly pro-integration parties, terrified at what was about to happen, caused the last-minute suspension. There may have been other reasons as well, but with no official explanation from the Portuguese Government, already a week after the suspension was announced, no-one really knows what caused the last-minute abandonment of the planned trip in November.

Despite our commitment to supporting what the people of East Timor so badly want, we do not believe that any further trust can be placed in the Portuguese Government to fulfil their pledge to send a mission, nor do we believe it to be a practical option.

The fate of East Timor cannot be left to bilateral talks. The resistance leader, Xanana Gusmao, has called for a ceasefire and talks without pre-conditions, under UN auspices. This requires a response from the UN. It is the best way forward.

It is now up to the United Nations to take initiatives to help the East Timorese in their hour of crisis. While the Indonesian rulers have played havoc with Portuguese intentions, it should prove more difficult for them to sabotage UN initiatives, based on the UN Charter, especially now that the UN is taking so many initiatives to resolve conflict situations elsewhere in the world.

The most important step now needed is for a meeting of the Security Council to assess the situation, and for a UN mission to go as soon as possible, charged not only to monitor the tense situation but also, and in particular, to begin the process of assessing the views of the people of East Timor on their future status. This is a matter for the international community and every effort must be devoted to bringing pressure to bear on the UN, the Security Council and the Secretary General, to act in accord with the many resolutions already adopted on the question of East Timor.

Finally, the UN Secretary-General, who has failed as yet to take a single initiative on behalf of the East Timorese, should immediately send representatives to the territory, in order to stay the hand of the occupiers.

Such a strategy does not exclude Portugal, the internationally-recognised Administering Power. On the contrary, now that its 'mission strategy' has collapsed in ignominy, Portugal should spare no effort to mobilise support from its allies for decisive action from the United Nations.

31 October 1991

[This statement was drawn up as the UN is about to select a new Secretary General, with Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, a leading contender. His appointment would be a further grave setback for East Timor. Under such circumstances, supporters of East Timor will be faced with the need to work out a new strategy.]